

# Literacy and Families

## *Literacy and families*

Almost 43% of NWT adults had an average prose literacy score at Levels 1 and 2 in the International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey (IALSS)<sup>1</sup>. That means 4 out of 10 adults in the NWT face literacy challenges. These

challenges often impact their families. People with low literacy face inequalities in many areas, including employment, poverty, health, and children's learning.

Parents are their children's first teachers. It may be difficult for parents with low literacy to support their children's learning, particularly when their children are at school. Parents with lower literacy skills may not have the confidence or the skills to deal with the school system.

### IALSS Skill Levels

Level 1	People have difficulty dealing with any written material
Level 2	People can deal only with written material that is clear and well laid out.
Level 3	People can understand and use the information they need for daily life
Levels 4/5	People can understand and use complex written material

### *Literacy levels and literacy practices at home*

In the NWT, there is a strong link between people's literacy levels and their literacy practices at home. As literacy scores go up, attitudes towards reading become more positive. People at the lowest level have the lowest scores in the 'attitude towards reading scores'<sup>2</sup>. Overall, females have the highest scores in 'frequency and variety of reading' and 'attitude towards reading', while males are more comfortable in the area of math.

### *Literacy and educational attainment*

Parents' education levels may affect their children's literacy levels for a variety of reasons. Youth whose parents didn't finish high school have the lowest prose literacy scores of all youth<sup>1</sup>. There is good news in the NWT: people aged 26 to 35 (the age of many parents) had the highest literacy scores in the IALSS, which could have positive outcomes for their children<sup>2</sup>.

### *Literacy skills and economic security*

In Canada, in the year 2000, one in five children lived in poverty<sup>3</sup>. Children of parents who have not graduated from high school are twice as likely to live in poverty as those whose parents finished high school<sup>3</sup>. They are also at greater risk of low literacy. People with higher literacy skills tend to have greater economic security. This contributes to a healthier and more stable learning environment for children. Today, well-paid secure jobs require higher levels of skills than in the past. People with higher literacy skills:

- Have less trouble finding a job than people with low literacy.
- Have more opportunities and job choice than people with low literacy.
- Are more likely to have a secure job.
- Are less likely to lose their job.
- Are more likely to find work in higher paid jobs.
- Will be re-employed more quickly than someone with low literacy skills.

## *Literacy and healthy behaviours*

Higher health literacy scores are associated with higher literacy scores generally. Higher health literacy enables people to access, understand and use health information to maintain their family's health. They can find and access health services, communicate their needs to health professionals and follow instructions<sup>4</sup>. They are also more able to engage in healthy behaviours and make positive lifestyle choices<sup>5</sup>. Poor health can be a barrier for learning for adults, as well as children.

## *What can we do about it?*

Family literacy is a positive, non-threatening way to improve literacy. Family literacy is about families doing things together in their everyday lives, like telling stories, cooking, singing, reading or playing games. Family literacy programs give parents tools to help children with literacy at home. Family literacy programs often engage parents who may not take part in other learning programs. They come to a family literacy program because they want to be better able to support their children. In the NWT, most communities have family literacy activities.

## *Who benefits from family literacy programs?*

Family literacy programs benefit children and adults:

- Literacy activities become a part of everyday family life.
- Relationships are enriched through spending time with one another.
- Parents often become more interested in their own literacy skills and may want to continue in adult education.
- Stronger communication is developed in families.
- Children develop a positive attitude towards literacy activities.
- Literacy skills within families improve.

In the end, everyone benefits from supporting family literacy development. As NWT literacy skills improve, people will be more likely to finish high school and go on to further training, have healthier lifestyles, be employed and have higher incomes.

<sup>1</sup> Human Resources and Skills Development Canada & Statistics Canada. (2005). *Building on our competencies: Canadian results of the International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey 2003*. Catalogue no. 89-617-X1E. Ottawa.

<sup>2</sup> Human Resources and Skills Development Canada & Statistics Canada. (2005). *Building on our competencies: The Northwest Territories results of the International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey 2003*. Ottawa.

<sup>3</sup> Movement for Canadian Literacy. *Literacy Facts*. Ottawa.

<sup>4</sup> Canadian Council on Learning. (2008). *Health literacy in Canada: A healthy understanding*. Ottawa.

<sup>5</sup> NWT Dept. of Health and Social Services. (2005). *The NWT Health Status Report 2005*. Yellowknife, NT.

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